

## Pretend by kittenCorrosion

**Series:** [the name of the game \(stranger teens 2.0\)](#) [2]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Bullying, F/M, Fluff, Insecurity, Post-Season 2, Pretending, first day of high school, he worries too much, high school sucks, idk honestly it's kind of slice of life more than anything, it's not an AU the summary just sucks sorry, mike is so awkward i love him, mike realizes el could be popular, plenty of fluff honestly

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Troy (Stranger Things), Will Byers, buncha random ocs, that bitch stacey

**Relationships:** Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Max/Lucas Sinclair, the lumax is really light tho

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**Summary:**

Jane Hopper is the cute, mysterious new girl at Hawkins High. She doesn't know anybody... and plenty of people want to be her friend. Mike knows he can't ruin that story by acting like he knows her, but boy does he want to.

## Pretend

### Author's Note:

you guys i'm sorry i've been working on like ten different stories but lately i've been sucking so hard at writing endings. i have seven things started and no fucking clue how to end them i don't know why it's not even writer's block it's like fuckin finishing writing block i don't even know i'm just FRUSTRATED.

i was talking to friend and we were just theorizing about season three and he brought up the idea of everyone having to pretend like they don't know el to keep suspicion down. i thought it would be super cute to have mike struggling to follow that rule so... this happened.

i meant to get this out like four days ago and i have a cabin sleepover story i wrote like the day season 2 came out that i need to finish (i think other people beat me to the punch with that idea but WHATEVER I STILL WANT TO POST IT) and a pool party at steve's story and like a new AU and also fuck college fuck college fuck college ugh.

um wow sorry that's a lot of ranting. i just want to get these one-shots out there. i'm annoyed with myself but this is kind of cute so... yeah.

Mike was waiting by the bike rack which was pretty usual except for the fact that this bike rack was in front of Hawkins High School instead of Hawkins Middle.

It was their first day and—after barely escaping his mother and her camera that morning—he felt strangely anxious. Not because he was starting high school, he didn't really care about that at all, but because he was going to see El for the first time in over a month.

And he was going to have to act like he'd never seen her before in his life.

It was on Hopper's orders. They'd given her a cover story, Jane "El" Hopper, the chief of police's new daughter he'd adopted over the summer. There were whispers of her being a long lost love child, or that she was a Russian refugee. When asked Hopper would just shrug and say, "I found her and she needed me."

In order for that story to work, she couldn't know anybody. She had to be the new kid, in every way. No friends. No acquaintances. No boyfriend—or anyone who could be considered one.

Mike hated it.

"Hey, Mike!"

A bike pulled up next to him, followed by a skateboard and he turned to see Lucas and Max coming towards him, Dustin appearing over the hill behind them, panting like he hadn't been able to keep up with them.

"Hey guys," he greeted his friends, biting back his anxiety.

"Have you seen Will?"

"No, Jonathan is bringing him. I'm sure they'll be here soon," Mike told them, scanning the parking lot for the Byers' rusted sedan.

Just then the beige police Blazer pulled into the lot and Mike felt all the air leave his lungs as it stopped in front of the school a good hundred feet away from their bike rack. The car door opened and everything faded away as he saw the familiar form crawl out, a pair of battered white Chucks touching down before the door slammed and he saw her unobscured.

She was smiling, making a face at Hopper through the window, adjusting her backpack on her shoulder, one of the straps dangling off. Her hair, which just brushed past her shoulders now, was pulled back from her face with two blue, plastic barrettes, the curls having grown into looser waves. Her skirt brushed her knees, the sky blue pleats matching her barrettes, a white belt cinching it over the

striped pastel short-sleeve shirt.

*She looks beautiful*, he thought, eyes fixated.

“Mike!” Dustin’s hand smacked him on the shoulder. “Quit staring, we’re not supposed to know her!”

“I know,” he snapped, looking down, feeling his face turn red. “I just... it’s stupid. How am I supposed to pretend like I don’t know her when I’ve been talking to her every day since last year?”

“I dunno. We can ask her to sit with us at lunch and it’ll be chill. Just be casual until then, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah...” he huffed.

He looked over again, watching as the Chief drove off, leaving her alone in front of the school that was being swarmed with strangers. She glanced around, suddenly nervous at just how many people there were, crossing her arms over the binder she’d been holding and hugging it to her chest. It was obvious that she was uncomfortable and he hated that he couldn’t go to her and grab her hand and assure her it would be okay.

He *hated* pretending.

“You’re staring again,” Lucas said from behind him.

“There’s no way he’s going to make it until lunch,” Max piped up. “He’s way too in love with her for that. Ten bucks says he finds her before then.”

“We have the same homeroom,” Mike scowled and turned away as El vanished into the doors of the school. “I’m going to... introduce myself. That’s allowed.”

“You going to introduce your lips to hers?” Dustin snorted.

“Shut up!”

Jonathan’s rusted car appeared and parked and Will got out, waving goodbye to his brother before scurrying across the lot towards his

friends who were waiting.

“Will!” Max greeted him first. “You ready?”

It hadn’t taken long for Max to integrate her way into their party. Mike, after seeing her skills and her willingness to help them—and El—had *finally* accepted her as their self-proclaimed “zoomer”. Lucas and Dustin had both apologized for making it seem like they had been trying to replace El but he had accepted that it hadn’t been intentional and waved it off. And she hadn’t been replaced, she had come back and had hugged him and told him she was sorry, so it didn’t really matter anyways. Max was a valued member of their group and had even started learning D&D during the summer, sitting in on a few campaigns.

She was a full-fledged party member now, her elbow resting on Lucas’s shoulder as she tucked her skateboard into her hip, smiling at their smallest friend.

“Yeah!” Will smiled, then glanced at Mike, who was still staring longingly at the doors where El had vanished. “Is she here already?”

“Yup, Romeo’s already pining for his girlfriend. I’m glad I’m not in your guys’ homeroom so I don’t have to deal with him moping,” Max snickered.

“She’s not actually my—” Mike started to protest but was cut off by the warning bell.

They all scattered, waving goodbye and promising to meet at lunch in the same spot by their bikes. Nancy had given him a head’s up that it was lame to actually eat in the cafeteria and that lunches from home were the way to go. He hadn’t seen his sister yet but didn’t really think it mattered since a pretty senior talking to the nerdiest freshmen would throw people off anyways.

Will was quiet and observant as they walked to their classroom, but no one called him Zombie Boy or jumped at him or really seemed to notice him at all and he slowly relaxed. Maybe high school wouldn’t be that bad. Maybe everyone would forget the past.

“Frogface! Fairyboy!”

The loud, abrasive voice came from behind and Mike felt a shoe kick his achilles tendon, wincing and almost tripping to get away. He knew the voice before the insult even registered, the fear and annoyance that came with it having been ingrained in him since fifth grade. With a sigh he turned.

“What do you want, Troy? Shouldn’t you be going to class instead of harassing freshmen?” Mike sighed, knowing this was going to be a pain in the ass.

They’d been free of him last year since he was older and had gone to high school, their eighth grade year a peaceful, quiet ride that was now apparently over. Damn.

“Not until you piss yourself, Wheeler,” Troy closed in, breathe hot as his fingers fisted into the front of Mike’s polo. “We’ll just have to make that happen this year.”

“Quit it!” Will protested, receiving a shove and falling back. “Ow!”

Clearly there was still a grudge there and Mike pulled at Troy’s hand, not wanting to start a fight but wanting to get to homeroom before the bell—

*Riiiiiiiiiiiiing!*

“Shit,” Troy dropped him and turned. “I’ll finish this later, Frogface.”

“Whatever!”

They didn’t have time to dwell on it as they ran to their homeroom, sliding in just as the teacher walked over to close the door, giving the two boys a disapproving glare through the glasses perched low on her nose.

“Late on the first day?”

“S-Sorry,” they mumbled.

Mike scanned the room, looking for the face he was desperate to see.

He'd hoped he could snag a seat fairly close to her without it looking suspicious, but their brush with the bully in the hall had delayed them too long and all the seats around her were taken. In fact, she was enmeshed by several of the more popular girls in his grade, eyes wide as they showed her their Lip Smackers and she was smiling tentatively looking so pretty his eyes hurt. His heart shriveled down as he realized that she was doing fine so far... without him.

It made sense. She was pretty enough to be friends with Stacey, and quiet and kind enough to get along with almost anybody. Sure, she'd been nervous, she'd told him so and he had assured her he would "make friends" with her quickly so she wouldn't have to be alone, but apparently it looked like maybe she didn't need it.

She didn't need him.

"Mr. Wheeler, would you like to take your seat?"

Mrs. Dossenko's voice rang out and Mike realized he'd been standing at the front staring. Will was near the back, standing next to two empty desks and giving him a look that said, "come on you idiot".

"S-Sorry," he mumbled again, turning red as the class snickered and he quickly walked to the extra desk and plopped into it, letting his backpack fall to the floor.

The next hour was torture. Mrs. Dossenko introduced herself officially and went over the basics of high school, which he completely tuned out, eyes burning a hole into the back of El's neck. There was a role call, of course, and when "Jane Hopper" had been announced everyone had turned to look at her.

"P-present," she stuttered, imitating what the others had said.

Of course everyone was fascinated with a new girl and she was no different. Mike barely kept himself from jumping up and running to her and hugging her, wanting to make her feel safe and block out the staring eyes. But her new "friends" took care of that. He was forced to sit and watch as the girls around her whispered things, pointing out different people in the classroom and giggling, like they were trying to tell her who was cool and who wasn't.

When they got to him, Stacey snickered and said something, her mouth twitching into a sardonic smirk, her lips whispering into El's ear. For the first time that day their eyes met and he felt everything fade away as he stared into the depths of her hazel-browns. Comforting and beautiful and—

They were laughing. All of them, including El, and felt his face heat up as he looked away quickly, breaking the eye contact he'd been craving all morning.

*I have to pretend like I don't know her. Quit staring, you creep,* he berated himself, trying to pretend like he wasn't wounded.

What had they said? Why had El laughed? Was she finally realizing what a nerd he was? Just how much a loser he was in comparison to the rest of the world?

Would she decide she didn't want to be their friend and hang out with the popular girls instead?

Every insecurity was falling onto him, weighing him down like an overstuffed backpack, making his shoulders droop. It hadn't occurred to him that this could happen but in some he wasn't surprised. She was pretty and sweet and interesting and he was... nothing close to that.

The bell rang, ending his self-deprecating hell, and instead of running to her like he had planned he dragged himself from his chair slowly, only glancing up in time to see her vanish out the door, her skirt a flash of blue as she left.

"What's your next class?" Will asked, interrupting his pity party.

"Uh..." He had to think about it. "Spanish?"

"I'm taking French with Lucas and Max," he said apologetically. "But lunch is in two periods."

"Yeah..." Mike agreed, still sad.

"Don't worry, Mike. She's just meeting people. She knows where she wants to be... just give her some space to remember that."



“What?”

But Will was gone, vanishing into the crowded hallway. Mike hadn't picked a locker yet and went straight to his next class, glancing around and hoping maybe he would run into her if he was lucky. How was he supposed to invite her to lunch if he didn't get the chance to talk to her?

Everything was frustrating and he sourly scanned the unfamiliar faces to no avail. She wasn't taking a foreign language yet, still working on grasping English, so he knew he wouldn't see her until after Spanish. They had fifth period Biology together and he hoped maybe by then he would get to “meet” her. He had to make a move then or he would be totally screwed.

Dustin had saved him a seat in Spanish and distracted him well enough, calling every single girl “senorita” and saying each Spanish word he saw with the worst accent possible, rolling his R's too much. The teacher loved him, of course, and Mike rolled his eyes but felt himself being pulled in, his worry pausing for the next fifty minutes.

The next class was similar, Geography, but with Max distracting him this time, her disdain for the teacher making her wildly entertaining as she mocked and sputtered like the balding man at the front of the classroom. By the time lunch rolled around he'd forgotten his anxiety, scanning the cafeteria for the pastel outfit and soft hazel-brown eyes. It was crowded but he zoned in on her as she came in from the other side. His feet moved before he really thought about it, pushing him through the crowd, trying to keep his eyes fixed on her.

*Just say hi, introduce yourself, and invite her to lunch since she's new and doesn't have anyone to sit with.*

She vanished suddenly, and he turned around, feeling frantic, his heart in his throat, his stomach on the floor, palms sweating—

“Oof!”

He whipped around in a panic, his shoulder smacking against something solid and warm and he turned as he heard a clatter and then the people around them let out a “ooooohh.”

It was El, looking down at her tray, which was on the floor, her milk spilled down the front of her skirt, her eyes wide as she looked back up at him.

Oh *shit*.

“I-I’m so sorry,” he sputtered, immediately getting down to try and pick her food up off the floor.

“Um,” she blinked.

“I was just—I mean, are you okay? Holy shit I’m so clumsy.”

There was brief pause of awkward tension as they stared at each other, both wanting to be familiar with each other but knowing it wasn’t allowed. Milk dripped from her skirt and suddenly some girl was standing next to her, handing her paper towels and helping her mop up the white liquid.

“You have to watch out, Janie,” she said, shooting Mike a withering glare. “There’s losers everywhere.”

He didn’t wait to see what her reply would be, scrabbling upright and *running*, face flaming, feeling like the biggest idiot on the fucking planet. Why was this so hard? He’d talked to her every day for over a year, assuring her they would see each other again and that everything would be okay. So why was “meeting” her tripping him up so much?

*Because you’re a total wastoid and she can do better than you. And now she’s realizing it.*

Hot tears pricked his eyes and he felt a void open up in his chest, the one that had opened up two years ago when she’d vanished in the science classroom, screaming as the lights flashed around them. It had only closed when she’d come back, walking into Will’s house and into his life again, making everything suddenly right, like it was always meant to be. And now there was a chance he would lose her again, to something he had no experience with.

Popularity.

With a snuffle he walked towards the parking lot, quickly wiping away his emotions and trying to think of a lie he could tell the others. They were all there, sitting on the ground in a circle, Max scooting herself around on her skateboard as she ate her sandwich, grinning as she zoomed past them. At his approach they all looked up.

“Where’s El?” Lucas asked.

“She... I couldn’t find her,” he quickly lied. “She must be sitting somewhere else or something.”

“People are being nice to her,” Will observed.

“I’m friends with her now! We met during English Comp,” Dustin piped up from the other side, looking self-satisfied. “We’re going to be partners for our presentation later on. I almost had to fight Nathan Gomez.”

“You did?” Mike blanched.

“Yeah, she didn’t really care that he was trying so it wasn’t really a competition.” He grinned, wagging his eyebrows. “You better get to know her soon, Mike, before someone else swoops in.”

“*What?*”

The insecurity that had been gnawing his gut was suddenly chomping down and making it hard to breathe. All of the girls she had talked to so far were intimidating, but he hadn’t considered that other boys would be going after her. Not so soon. It was her first day for crying out loud!

He must have looked ready to cry because Max elbowed Dustin in the arm as she rolled by on her skateboard, shooting him a nasty look before stopping next to Mike. She patted his arm.

“Don’t sweat it, Wheeler, you know you’re the only one she gets heart eyes for. The other guys can talk to her but don’t think she’s going to give two shits,” she pinched his cheek. “She can’t resist your pretty face, remember?”

It was what he needed to hear—even the last part—and he exhaled,

feeling a bit better as he shoved her hand away. She snickered and rolled back towards Lucas, taking another bite of her sandwich.

“Yeah...” he nodded contemplatively. “Yeah, thanks, Max.”

“But don’t take your time,” she frowned. “Some of the boys here are dicks and she doesn’t need to deal with that. I’ll fight them off when I have P.E. with her later but you better get in there.”

“Um... okay.”

They all started talking about their classes, making fun of teachers or classmates and commiserating about how much they missed Mr. Clarke. Mike tried to eat his lunch but didn’t feel hungry, his mind replaying the moment in the caf over and over. The girl’s words rang in his head, about him being a loser, and he couldn’t pretend like he wasn’t afraid that El would believe her. He *was* a loser and she had the potential to be one of the most popular girls at school.

It seemed obvious what she would choose.

“Mike, you coming?” Lucas asked.

Mike blinked, looking up at the hand being extended towards him and took it, trying not to mope but failing. Everything felt terrible. He’d been so excited, counting the days until today, when he would get to see her again, but now he wished it was over. He wanted to crawl into his bed and never come out again, never come back to school where he would have to see her whisper “loser” as she looked down at him, her hand held by someone else, some other boy who was stronger and cuter and looked better next to her.

“Mike, Jesus, quit making that face. You look like you’re going to cry,” Lucas snapped.

“What? I’m not—”

“Yes, you are. Quit acting like it’s the end of the world because you can’t talk to El. I’m sure you’ll talk to her later but right now you’re being a bitch.”

“I’m not being a bitch,” he protested.

“Yeah you are. So quit it.”

Algebra I went fine, the math distracting him from his misery just enough, but he nearly bolted out the door when it was over, racing for Biology and beating everyone else in the entire class. Instead of single desks it was two-person tables and he picked one close to the front by the door, sitting and waiting eagerly. His classmates slowly started pouring in and then... there she was, eyes wide and curious as she walked in.

Their eyes met.

He let himself smile and she smiled softly back, walking towards the table, clearly thinking the same thing he was. The teacher cleared his throat as his students started pairing off, announcing, “Your tablemate will be your lab partner for the rest of the year so choose wisely, kiddos.”

And entire year sitting next to El? In a class he knew he was going to love? Mike smiled. Nothing sounded better.

“Mike Wheeler, right?”

“Huh?”

Mike turned, looking up at Tammy Chapman who was giving him a contemplative look, arms crossed. He hadn’t noticed her come up next to him, snapping a piece of gum between her teeth as she narrowed her eyes.

“You’re a nerd. You’re smart. You could get me through this class,” she stated.

“What?” he blinked.

“Congratulations, you’re my new partner.”

“But—”

She didn’t give him time to say no, pulling the chair out and moving to sit down next to him. Suddenly it was gone and she fell towards empty space, landing on her butt on the floor with a screech that

made everyone turn and look. The class erupted into laughter and she threw him an accusatory glare as she stood back up and fluffed her skirt back up.

“Why did you pull my chair out?!” she snarled.

“I didn’t!” he raised his hands up innocently. “I was over here!”

“*Whatever*, Wheeler.”

She stomped off to find a new partner and then someone more familiar, more welcoming, was there, El’s hand resting on the back of rogue chair as she offered him that soft smile that made him melt. There was a tiny dot of blood under her nose that she quickly wiped away as she glanced down at the seat between them.

“Partners?” she asked.

“Y-Yeah!” he paused and tried to tone it down. “I mean, sure. Yeah. That would be cool.”

“Cool,” she agreed.

She sat down next to him, her chair close and he had to fight the urge to reach under the table and grab her hand, wanting to touch her more than anything. The familiar smell of woodsmoke and rosewater shampoo filled his nose and he inhaled heavily, all of the doubts and insecurity and worries he’d felt earlier fading away as she turned and smiled at him, holding out her hand.

“I’m new,” she said, a sly smile quirking her lips. “Jane Hopper. But... you can call me El. It’s my middle name.”

That had been the story. For the most part people seemed to be calling her Jane, but that would never be who she was to him and she didn’t want him to call her that anyways. She had always been his El—not even a birth certificate could change that.

“I’m Mike,” he played the role, grabbing her hand to shake it and trying to ignore the sudden surge of electricity in his body. “Mike Wheeler. Um, sorry I spilled your milk on you at lunch. I didn’t see you there.”

“It’s okay. Milk is white.”

She meant it hadn’t stained her light colored skirt and clearly she wasn’t upset by it, her eyes shining in amusement. He knew if that had happened when they were alone she would have laughed and made him give her more of his clothes to wear. She hoarded his clothing and used any excuse to get more.

Pulling a notebook and a pencil out of her pink backpack, she looked towards the front as the teacher started to lecture and pass out textbooks, wanting to be a good student like Hopper had told her to be. Mike did the same but kept glancing at her from the side of his eye, watching as she scribbled down messy notes, brow furrowed in concentration.

*How is she so fucking cute,* he wondered.

Tearing a piece of paper from his own notebook he quickly wrote something down, folding it so it wasn’t obvious and then slid it across the table to her. She took it, looking surprised, and unfolded it, staring down at the neatly printed message.

*You look really pretty today, El. I like your hair. I’m glad we get to be partners.*

There was a tiny misshapen heart and she smiled before setting it down and scribbling a response. Her knee bumped his as she slid the note back and he let his leg rest there, his corduroys pressing against her skin, warmth erupting up his body and making his face flush. He opened the note.

*Missed you.*

It was simple, the handwriting admittedly sloppy since while she was fully capable of reading and writing, she hadn’t had a whole lot of practice. She made up for it by surrounding the words with a dozen hearts, more prettily drawn than his. He suddenly felt invincible.

Her elbow brushed his and then she turned back, paying attention like the eager student she was. He felt calmer knowing she really did still like him, the insecurities from earlier fading as the teacher

droned, occasionally passing the note back and forth, drawing little doodles.

Too soon the bell rang and he sighed sadly before giving her a not-too-friendly wave and heading for P.E. as she went to Geography, their schedules keeping them just out of reach.

But now he knew she wasn't abandoning him. That she didn't think he was a loser.

The first day ended and his friends gathered by the bike rack again, complaining about the one teacher who always assigned homework and making plans to hang out and study for different classes when it got harder. Mike was watching the doors, waiting.

They were heading to the Palace to celebrate being done with the first day and he'd managed to procure extra quarters so El could come too. She hadn't been allowed out much during her year of isolation and he figured now that she had been exposed to the high school social life, it wouldn't be unusual for her to go out and see the town.

"There she is, lover boy," Max prodded him in the back. "Go get her. I want to show her how to own your asses in Pac-Man."

"I still have the high score!" Dustin protested.

"Not for long."

They bickered but Mike was already walking, having taken off the second Max pushed him, stumbling across the lawn towards El, who was in the midst of a cloud of the same girls who had claimed her earlier. This time he wasn't nervous, her adoration for him doodled in tiny hearts that filled her eyes now.

The pack stopped as he approached and he offered an awkward wave which she returned as she stepped forward.

"H-Hi, El," he coughed.

"Uh, are you talking to *Jane*?" One of the girls sneered, popping her gum. "Her name isn't Elle, loser."



“Middle name,” El piped up to explain. “I like it too.” She smiled brightly. “Hi, Mike.”

“Um, we’re going to the arcade... I was wondering if you wanted to come? I have extra quarters and my friends said it would be cool.”

El’s eyes were shining and she opened her mouth but was cut off by Stacey who stepped between them, shooting Mike a snooty sneer.

“Janie, you can’t. We’re going to the drugstore. You wanted lipstick, remember?”

El frowned. “When?”

“Now. We just decided that now. Come on.”

Stacey’s hand was on El’s wrist, pulling her towards the road but El frowned and jerked back, not liking the sudden possessiveness her new “friends” were treating her with. She turned to Mike, stepping closer to him and away from them, making her choice obvious.

“I want to play video games. I’m going with Mike, he’s nice and brought quarters.”

“You want to hang out with that troop of losers?” Stacey sneered. “I thought you were cool, Jane.”

“I am cool. *And* a loser,” she shrugged, not caring that this was apparently an issue. “He’s my partner. I want to hang out with him.”

“Partner?”

“In Biology,” Mike blurted, then flushed. “We sit at the same table. Um, she’s new and I thought she could use some help.”

There was a pause as the five other girls, who he’d known since kindergarten, gave him a once over and then turned away.

“Whatever, nerds.”

El blinked, frowning at the sudden shift. She didn’t understand the hierarchies and social aspect, too innocent to realize that she’d just

put herself on a course for being teased and called names. But she didn't care, shrugging and turning back to Mike.

"They're not nice anymore."

"They've never been nice to me. They liked you because—" He suddenly turned red and looked away.

"Because what?"

"N-Nothing."

"Mike. Friends don't—"

"Because you're really pretty," he blurted. "You could be popular and hang out with the cool kids and date the guys on the football team if you wanted to, El. I bet you could be a *cheerleader*. You're cool and I'm a loser nerd like I've always been which is fine but now..."

She frowned. "Now what?"

"Well, now you're not a loser nerd. And you don't have to be. You don't have to hang out with us if you don't want to, El. You can..." he swallowed. "You can do better than us. Than *me*."

There was a pause as they stood there, the September breeze still warm as it stirred the air between them. El's hand brushed his, tentative to hold it and break the illusion but wanting to comfort him all the same.

"Better? No," her voice was solid and she set her hand on his arm. "I *want* to be a loser nerd. With you. That's *better*."

The parking lot was starting to empty, the last few scragglers making their way out of the school and Mike couldn't hide the stupid grin that stretched across his face at her words. Just then Hop's Blazer pulled into the lot and El turned, recognizing the sound of the engine before it even stopped in front of the school. She grabbed Mike and pulled him over to the car, smiling.

"Can I go the arcade? With Mike," her smile widened. "He's my partner."

“For Biology,” he cut in again, feeling the weight of Hop’s oppressive stare. “I’m good at science, I can help her out.”

“I made a friend,” she said proudly.

Hopper looked between the two of them and snorted. Their charade was on his orders and he played the part, deciding it was probably time to loosen his worried grip. She couldn’t be in safer company anyways.

“Yeah, sure. I’m glad you’re making friends, kid. Call me if you want a ride home.”

“Thank you!”

They walked over to the bike rack and Mike hid a smile, barely keeping himself from reaching out and holding her hand. Her words had hit him right in the chest, warming him up and making him want to punch the air and do a dance and then grab her and kiss her.

But they had to pretend like they didn’t know each other... so he didn’t.

It sucked so hard.

When they made it back to their group the facade started to falter as they all turned to smile at her, excited to have her back. Max slung an arm around her shoulder and hugged her, the distrust that had once plagued them gone after Max had made it clear just how uninterested she was in Mike. After that it had been impossible to keep them from being friends.

“Hey, El,” Lucas leaned against Max who shoved him off. “How was your first day?”

She looked contemplative for a second.

“Loud. Lots of people. All talking at once and to me. I just nodded.”

“Yeah, you were hanging out with some of the most *obnoxious* bitches in the entire school,” Max stated, pulling her arm off and flopping her skateboard down.

“Stacey doesn’t know how to shut up,” Dustin grumped. “Or be a decent human being.”

“Ob... knocks-sus?” El’s brow wrinkled at the unfamiliar word.

“Obnoxious,” Mike corrected gently, always the one to explain. “It’s like... annoying. Like mouthbreathers and dumb people, they’re annoying. Obnoxious.”

“Oh. Yes,” she wrinkled her nose and nodded. “I want to be loser nerds. Like you.”

“Hey!” Dustin and Lucas yelped at the same time.

“Who called us that?”

“Stacey,” Mike answered. “She was trying to get El to go buy lipstick with them and stuff and then said I was loser nerd before stomping off.”

“I want to be a loser nerd,” El said again as she nodded earnestly.

Everyone started talking at once, Max swearing to trip Stacey the next time she saw her, Dustin and Lucas arguing over which was worse: loser or nerd? Will was missing, of course, having been driven home already but was supposed to meet them at the arcade. El listened, enjoying the chatter of her friends, before looking over at Mike.

“We go?”

“If you want. You can ride on my bike,” he swallowed. “Like you used to, remember?”

“Yes.”

She would never forget riding through the town in a pink dress and wig, staring with wide eyes at the people and buildings, a foreign world seen for the first time. Freedom, the wind on her face, the warmth of someone kind pressed against her, something sweeter than the Eggos she’d craved.

“Well, um, here,” he straddled the bike, scooting forward so there was room. “Hop on, Hopper.”

That was all the encouragement she needed, hopping onto the back of his bike and pulling her skirt down, wrapping her arms around his waist tightly. Too tightly. But he didn’t complain. The others exchanged sly grins but said nothing, hopping on their own bikes, Max gripping onto the back of Lucas’s bike so he could pull her along on her board.

Mike’s heart, which had been through quite an ordeal that day, felt like it would burst out of his chest as he pushed off. Everything was suddenly how it was supposed to be and as her arms squeezed his waist he smiled, making a quiet promise to never doubt her or her heart again, not when it so obviously belonged to him.

It only took two weeks for the rumor to fly, that the new, mysterious girl was dating Mike Wheeler.

“He’s her partner for Biology,” the story whispered, “and she just totally fell. Have you seen the way they look at each other?”

It was the first rumor Mike didn’t mind, and El seemed blissfully unaware of just how interesting her love life was to other people. But it was undeniable, the connection they had, and her proclamation that she wanted to be a “loser nerd” didn’t go to waste as she spent every break and lunch and class period with her friends. The “friends” she’d made on her first day dropped her like dirty laundry but she hadn’t cared. Mike was her partner and she could hold his hand and see him and sometimes sneak a kiss between the bells everyday which, after the year she’d spent in the cabin with only his voice on her Supercom, was pure bliss.

He hadn’t been kidding about helping her with her homework. She’d been a little overwhelmed by the amount but her friends helped her, Mike most of all. His intelligence, the thing that had been almost a burden of shame most of his life, was suddenly the most precious thing he could share and he showed her diagrams and equations and novels with an endless amount of patience. In fact half the time she spent at his house was just doing homework, eating dinner with his family and then vanishing into the basement to try and write an essay

on Hamlet or make a poster for Biology about the cell and its parts.

But the help didn't go only one way, Mike soon found out.

It had been a month at least and he'd almost completely forgot about a certain unsavory individual whose favorite hobby was making his life hell. Being in different years helped but it didn't keep him entirely safe from—

"Frogface! There you are!" A rough hand on his shoulder. "And you have the rest of your merry band of losers too! Good to see you, Midnight. Fairyboy. Toothless," Troy said as he shoved each one.

"I have teeth now!" Dustin protested. "Check out these pearls."

He grinned and Troy blinked, clearly unimpressed. He didn't notice who was behind them, the two girls frowning as they were pushed back behind by their protective friends, Mike stepping in front of El, not wanting her to have to deal with it. As if she and Max weren't the most intimidating members of their party.

"Looks like I'll just have to punch them out sometime, Toothless. Send you back to the dentist's office."

"Don't you—"

"Dustin, it's not worth it," Mike cut in, shaking his head. "He's just being ass as usual don't pay—"

"What'd you call me, Wheeler?"

Troy got up in his face, snarling, fist raising, and Mike realized his mistake. Everything slowed, his heart rate, his breathing, the whole world going into slow-motion as he watched the fist get higher, pulling back, the punch aiming straight for his face.

*This is gonna hurt*, he thought, blinking.

But then the first froze and Mike watched as Troy grunted in confusion, looking at his fist, trying to understand what was happening. There was a gentle hand on Mike's shoulder, pushing him to the side and Troy's face warped from confusion to surprise to *fear*

as El stepped out from behind her boy, chin tilted, eyes full of fire.

He'd never forget that face.

"Y-You—"

Troy was shoved backward, his fist falling down to his side as his eyes widened to a comical degree. El was in front of them now, facing Troy down like he was some pest she was going to squish with her shoe. People in the hallway paused, noticing the tension and when she spoke, her voice filled the air like a clap of thunder.

"You don't touch him. *Ever.*"

Her brow twitched but as far Mike could tell she wasn't using her powers, just pure intimidation. Troy froze, not wanting to give in but clearly afraid of her, his fingers ghosting over his right arm as if he could feel the bone snapping again. His hand trembled.

"Understand?" she asked eyes as stormy as her voice.

Silence.

*"Do you understand?"*

He broke, shying back from them, like a startled child, almost tripping over his own feet.

"Yes! God, fine, I'll leave your nerdy boyfriend alone you *freak!*" He spat onto the floor in front of her. "But you better watch your back!"

Her brow twitched again and he jumped like he'd been electrocuted, the fear back in his eyes as her chin tilted down, the storm filling her face. He didn't give her another reason to fight back, turning and scrabbling down the hallway like a scared animal, disappearing around the corner. Everyone who had been watching were now staring in amazement at the imposing new girl. She turned to Mike.

"Mouthbreather," she nodded casually. "Won't come back now."

"El what did you—"

“Nothing.” Her voice lowered. “I didn’t use it to hurt him. I didn’t need to. He’s afraid.”

“Well, damn, Hopper, I would be too!” Max exclaimed, way too happy. “That guy was giving me shit for hanging you guys but I didn’t even scare him like you did!”

Dustin and Mike exchanged a look and Mike nodded, giving him permission to tell the story.

“El broke his arm. Two years ago. Troy and James caught us,” he gestured to Mike and himself, “by the quarry and had a knife and Mike, um, jumped but El caught him and then she broke Troy’s arm.” He brightened. “It was fucking *awesome*.”

El’s face turned pink and she looked down, feeling weirdly embarrassed. She didn’t *like* hurting people, but she would blaze through an entire gateway of demodogs and shadow monsters to protect her friends. Mike especially.

“Holy *shit*,” Max stared at El with new appreciation. “You just keep getting more awesome.”

“Yeah,” Mike agreed, eyes soft. “I told you, she’s the best.”

It had been a month since school started and Mike decided that he didn’t need to pretend like he wasn’t totally and completely enamored with her, stooping down to kiss her gently, the thing he’d been wanting to do since he first saw her get out of the car on the first day of school. He didn’t care that they were standing in the middle of the hallway with people looking... he wanted them to see. So they would know just how much he cared about her.

When he pulled back she was blushing.

“Mike,” it was almost a whisper. “We’re supposed to pretend—”

“I can’t anymore, El. You make it too hard,” he was smiling, his hand holding hers. “They know we like each other, and you just saved my ass again. I had to say thank you.”

She stared at him, eyes narrowed, like she was thinking carefully



about his words. He had been the one to explain “pretend”, what it meant to act differently than how you wanted to, how some people were good at it and others weren’t. It was only because Hop had been adamant that she agreed, but he could see her resolve breaking down as she gnawed on her lip.

“We like each other,” she stated, looking around. “They know?”

“Yeah, they’ve been talking about it. It’s not a secret.”

“Okay. No more pretending.”

She threw herself at him and he caught her just barely, her arms around his neck as he fell back against the row of lockers, her lips on his. It was a longer kiss, one full of excitement and happiness and he felt himself smiling as he set his hands on her waist. He felt incredibly lucky, that even though she could have made a different choice and advanced socially, she’d decided to stay with him instead.

He forgot their friends were there until they promptly ruined the moment.

“Ew, guys! PDA!”

“Get a room, Mike.”

“Do you have to do that *here*?”

El pulled back and turned, frowning, like she forgot they were there too. Mike was still holding her close and they both opened their mouths to protest but were interrupted by the warning bell. Everyone still in the hallway scattered, and Mike opened his locker to grab his books, reluctantly letting her go. They had homeroom so she waited, and when he’d thrown his backpack back over his shoulder she slid her hand into his.

“No more pretending?” she asked, eyes shining.

“Yeah,” he smiled, feeling his heart quiver for her like it always did.  
“No more pretending.”

**Author's Note:**

i'm going to try and finish up more but until the inspiration hits i'm going to be floundering. it'll probably be all at once and there'll be like seven one-shots at once jesus christ i'm a mess.

anyways i love you all, new readers and old, and i'm trying to get down and respond to some comments cause ya'll make me so emotional and happy eesh. fuck i love you guys.

as always feel free to validate me in the comments cause that shit makes cry <3

-g